

## Chapter 22 Family Ties

Moana

“Ahem.”

Ethan and I jerked our heads up from the portfolio of his childhood drawings, our train of conversation now broken, to see none other than Edrick standing in the doorway — and he didn’t look happy.

“Oh, hello,” I said, feeling a bit nervous under the billionaire’s strangely disapproving stare. “Ethan was just showing me some of his work.”

Without a word, Edrick slowly walked into the studio. His shoes clicked loudly on the concrete floor, echoing through the room’s tall ceilings. For several long moments, the Alpha billionaire slowly circled the studio and looked at all of the art with his hands in his pants pockets. I noticed that he wasn’t looking around with wonder, like I had when Ethan first turned on the light, but rather with an almost disgusted look on his face. He almost seemed repulsed by the art, which was surprising considering the fact that he had plenty of expensive artwork hanging in both his mansion in the mountains and his city penthouse.

Finally, Edrick turned to face me and slowly walked up to where Ethan and I stood, stopping in front of me. He hardly paid any mind to Ethan, as though his brother wasn’t even there.

“Ella is looking for you,” he said to me in a deep, irritated voice. “You should be with her.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied, feeling even more nervous as the Alpha billionaire towered over me, looking down at me with an aggravated look on his handsome face. “I thought she was with her grandmother.”

“She is,” Edrick said. His gaze finally slid over to Ethan. There was something dark about the way he looked at his own brother, as if he didn’t trust him. Meanwhile, Ethan only looked back at Edrick with an almost amused sparkle in his eyes, as if he had been experiencing this behavior from his brother for a long time already.

“Hello to you too, big brother,” Ethan said.

There was a long silence. I sensed a palpable air of discomfort, and it involuntarily made me take a step backwards. “I’ll go back to Ella, now,” I said, heading nervously for the door. “Thank you for showing me your studio, Ethan.”

“It was a pleasure,” Ethan replied. Our eyes lingered on each other for a moment before I glanced over at Edrick, who seemed to look at me with a hint of fiery jealousy in his eyes.

“I’ll come with you,” Edrick suddenly said.

“Come back any time,” Ethan called after us as we walked out of Ethan’s studio. Edrick closed the door behind us, and the last thing I saw before the door closed was Ethan’s face. He was smiling, almost knowingly, as if he could tell that there was something more between Edrick and I than meets the eye.

As soon as the door shut, Edrick angrily took my arm and pulled me down the hallway. He was being a bit rough with me and his hard grip burned my bare arm, so I yanked my arm away and stopped in my tracks in the dark corridor.

“What’s your problem?” I asked, feeling my hands curl into fists at my sides. “I don’t appreciate you touching me like that.”

Edrick glared down at the floor for a few moments, then back up at me. “You shouldn’t be so trusting of him. He’s not who he seems.”

“He’s your brother—”

“Ethan is not my brother.”

I was taken aback by Edrick’s stern tone, and the way his face flashed with anger as he said those words. We stood there silently in the dark corridor for a few moments. The ceiling, I was now realizing, was made of patterned glass, which allowed the moonlight to shine down onto the marble tiles and cast designs on our faces. It made Edrick look both incredibly handsome and incredibly frightening at the same time as he glared at me.

Before either of us said anything else, he turned on his heel and headed toward the stairs.

“Come on. I don’t want you to leave my side for the rest of the night.”

Sighing, I took one last glance over my shoulder at Ethan’s studio before jogging to catch up with Edrick. We briskly descended the stairs back to the main floor, then passed through the garden to make our way back to the banquet hall.

As we returned to the banquet hall, I felt everyone’s eyes on me. The music had come to a bit of a lull by the time we entered, while the guests milled about and sipped their drinks. I felt my face flush hot as I crossed the room right next to Edrick, wondering if he noticed that his family friends and cousins were staring at us together. If he did notice, he didn’t say anything about it.

“There you are, darling,” Verona said, holding her hand out for Edrick. Her smiling eyes flickered over to me, as well as Ella’s, who was sitting in her grandmother’s lap.

Edrick’s father, Michael, merely shot me an indifferent stare before pushing himself up out of his chair and beckoning for Edrick to follow.

“Moana, look!” Ella exclaimed, holding out her hand as Michael and Edrick walked over to the bar. “Grandma gave me a present.” On Ella’s wrist was a delicate silver bracelet with a small charm that had the letter “E” on it. Smiling, I took the little girl’s hand and inspected the bracelet.

“It’s very pretty,” I said.

“It’s a charm bracelet,” Verona chimed in. “As Ella gets older, she can add more charms to it.”

Before I could answer, Kelly ambled over to us from where she stood at a table nearby, champagne glass in hand. “Verona loves to spoil Ella,” she said. Her face was the perfect picture of sweetness, but I could sense a hint of what almost sounded like jealousy behind it.

“Ella is my only granddaughter, after all,” Verona replied, squeezing Ella’s shoulders. “It’s my job to spoil her.”

Kelly opened her mouth to speak, but Edrick suddenly returned. He had a sour look on his face as he stood behind his mother.

“What’s wrong, Eddy?” Kelly asked, c\*\*\*\*\*g her head and twirling a bit of hair around her finger.

Edrick didn’t answer, partially because it seemed he didn’t want to answer, but also partially because the orchestra began to play again. I immediately recognized the song as one of my favorite classical pieces: Vivaldi’s Winter. Verona, seeing the smile on my face, suddenly spoke up.

“Edrick, Moana has never had the pleasure of attending one of our banquets,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him from her seat. “I’ll watch Ella. Why don’t you two go and dance?”

I felt my face get hot. Kelly seemed to tense beside me, but said nothing. Edrick, letting out a small sigh, held his arm out for me. As he led me toward the dance floor, I could feel even more eyes on me this time, so many that I almost considered refusing the dance and returning to sit with Ella and Verona. But it was too late; before I had the chance to refuse,

Edrick firmly took one of my hands, wrapping his other around my waist, and pulled me so close to him that our waists were pressed soundly together.

“Have you danced before?” Edrick asked as we moved around the dance floor.

I paused, wondering whether I should admit that his own brother gave me a crash course not long ago in the garden, but decided against it and shook my head as I felt my heart quicken its pace. “Not like this,” I said. I felt how fluidly Edrick guided me around the dance floor, as though our bodies had melted into one — but I also felt the disapproving glares of Kelly and Michael, as well as those of the other guests.

“Hm,” Edrick muttered. He held up our intertwined hands, allowing me to spin once before he pulled me back in. “You seem like you’ve danced before.”

A lump started to rise in my throat. I opened my mouth to finally admit that Ethan had taught me some moves earlier, but before I could, the song ended. That is when I realized that our bodies were pressed so close together that I could feel his steady heartbeat and his breath on my face — instead of citrus, it smelled like a dizzying combination of whiskey and cigars, and reminded me of our one night stand. I felt my heart flutter before Edrick stepped away from me, bowing.

“I-I need to use the ladies’ room,” I said suddenly, wanting to take a breather. Edrick nodded, pointing over to the door before wordlessly walking back to his mother and daughter. Without hesitation, I smoothed down the front of my dress and scurried over to the door, ignoring the feeling of dozens of eyes on me, and let out a deep sigh once I was in the dark corridor.

Halfway down the corridor, I found the door that led to the bathroom.

The bathroom was enormous, and had a long row of marble sinks and several stalls, as though this bathroom was often used for large quantities of people; no doubt that the Morgan family often had all sorts of banquets and galas where they would find it necessary to have such a large bathroom.

I walked up to the sink and ran my hands under the faucet, letting the cold water calm my nerves.

As I was drying my hands on the plush hand towel, I suddenly felt someone tap my shoulder. I jumped, not realizing that there was someone else in here, and half expected Edrick to be impatiently standing behind me.

When I turned around, however, it wasn't Edrick.

It was Kelly.